

***Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 8: Letters and Papers From Prison***

**Author:** Dietrich Bonhoeffer

**Editor:** John W. de Gruchy

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Reviewed by: Craig Falvo, The Church of Jesus Christ blog

I recently received a copy of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, part of the Bonhoeffer Works series from Fortress Press. The sixteen volume series is claimed to be "the definitive English translation of Bonhoeffer's theological and other writings. It includes a great deal of material that appears for the first time in English, as well as documents discovered only after the publication of the original German volumes." (xvii)

*Letters and Papers from Prison* contains 206 letters written to or by Dietrich Bonhoeffer from April 11, 1943 to February 28, 1945. It was originally compiled by Eberhard Bethge (August 28, 1909-March 18, 2000), a close friend of Bonhoeffer and a fellow resister of the Nazis. Bethge was also a biographer of Bonhoeffer.

My favorite letter/paper was #187: *Outline for a Book*. This paper was written after the failed attempt on Hitler's life (annotated by Bethge as August 3, 1944). Here, Bonhoeffer outlines a three chapter book:

1. Taking Stock of Christianity; 2. What is Christian faith, really? 3. Conclusions. (499)

In this letter, Bonhoeffer draws some interesting conclusions about what it means to be the church. How the church is supposed to get there is even more interesting.

The church is church only when it is there for others. As a first step it must give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the freewill offering of the congregations and perhaps be engaged in some secular vocation [Beruf]. The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community-not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling [Beruf] what a life with Christ is, what it means "to be there fore others." (503)

I don't know of too many Lutheran pastors who would agree with Bonhoeffer here...at least concerning their vocation...but it's an interesting thought nonetheless. It is a shame that all we have is this paper that contains the rough outline.

This is an excellent resource for those studying Bonhoeffer. There are a plethora footnotes that cross-reference other letters/papers in this volume as well as other volumes in the series. These notes contain other information as well, including information on whether the specific paper/letter was published, or if excerpts were published as well as background context for the letter/paper.. This is the scholar's edition of *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

While not my favorite book in the series to date, this book is an important reference to one of the greatest theological minds of the 20th century.

**Disclaimer:**

I received this book free from Fortress Press. Providing me a free copy in no way guarantees a favorable review. The opinions expresses in this review are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's [16 CFR, Part 255](#): "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

1 Mark Alterman, Manhattan Christian College Dietrich Bonhoeffer 's Letters and Papers from Prison as a Core Text on the Intersection of the Sacred and the Secular Steven Haynes of Rhodes College described the remarkable interest in Dietrich Bonhoeffer among Protestant Christians in the twentieth century, in his book *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint*. In the 1960s, radical young theologians were finding the seeds for a secular theology in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.<sup>1</sup> These new biographies were made possible by the publication of the 17-volume *Bonhoeffer Works* project. The carefully edited and annotated volumes began to appear in German in the 1980s and reached completion by 1999. - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, letter from prison, Aug. 23, 1944. My sister pointed out how much significant writing comes from people who were incarcerated: The Apostle Paul (several of his epistles), Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>2</sup> The letters in this volume describe in detail the routines of prison life. And they offer a glimpse of life lived by ordinary civilians during months of aerial bombardments, as the fabric of daily life slowly crumbles. They also reveal the thoughts and emotions of a man whose faith in God and trust in survival are put to the severest test. Despite Dietrich Bonhoeffer's earlier theological achievements and writings, it was his correspondence and notes from prison that electrified the postwar world six years after his death in 1945. The materials gathered in this volume introduce, to a broad readership, his novel and exciting ideas of religionless Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Some features of the site may not work correctly. DOI:10.2307/j.ctt22nm627.48. Corpus ID: 142509540. *Letters and Papers from Prison*. @inproceedings{Bonhoeffer1997LettersAP, title={Letters and Papers from Prison}, author={Dietrich Bonhoeffer}, year={1997} }. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Published 1997. Sociology. Despite Dietrich Bonhoeffer's prior theological achievements and writings, it was his correspondence and notes from prison that electrified the postwar world six years after his death in 1945. The materials gathered and selected by his friend Eberhard Bethge in *Letters and Papers from Prison* not only brought Bonhoeffer to a wide and appreciative readership, especially in North America; they also introduced to a broad readership his novel and exciting ideas of religionless Christianity, his open and honest theological appraisal of Christian doctrines, and his sturdy faith in face of uncert